

WAR IS KIND: IDEALIZATION IN MILITARISM

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The Development and Improvement of Instructions. (May 2014)

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The questions being considered throughout the length of this Thesis relate to masculinity in militarism and the effects of idealizing the two in relation to each other. The essential questions are: What causes militarism to be idealized? Does war create a need for masculinity, or does masculinity create a need for war? What are the effects of idealizing combat on such a large and destructive scale? My methods for answering these questions include sitting in on and transcribing interviews with recent combat veterans, as well as researching articles written on war and masculinity from scholarly journals. I also endeavor to look at representations of war-time masculinity in literature, both fiction and non-fiction. Resulting from this research, the conclusion of my Thesis will explain how an idealized sense of masculinity can effect soldiers going to and returning to war in both negative and positive manners.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Each man goes to war for a different reason. Some go to support their families. Others go in order to find structure and support lacking in their developmental youths, and still others go to war with the sole purpose of returning as a societally acceptable and traditionally masculine man; in other words, they hope to attain the physical strength, mental toughness, and patriarchal leadership values that are traditionally associated with modern American masculinity. The central foci of my thesis are those men¹ who go to war with the intention of gaining a stamp of masculinity, and as a result have a tendency to idealize roles in militarism and war. This militarized idealism is common upon a soldier's return as well as in the midst of combat. I am questioning why men choose to join the military based on perceived ideals and why, upon their return from war, these ideals are often (although certainly not always) confirmed and communicated to their friends and family back home or with their compatriots as "war stories". This has led me to investigate individual perceptions of masculinity, the influence of culture and advertisement on the decision to join the military, and also on changing gender roles within the military and combat roles.

The idealization of war can be a dangerous concept if left unchecked by reality; young men who dream of lives as glorified soldiers with medals hanging from their necks often neglect the reality of combat, in which solidarity is just as prevalent as the buddy system and mental deterioration

¹ My thesis and research, because of both its narrow scope and the relatively recent admittance of female soldiers to combat roles in the military, will focus solely on the role of men and their versions of masculinity as perceived through combat.

and disintegration are very staunch possibilities. Soldiers returning from combat are arriving back in the United States with PTSD diagnosis rates of almost 5 times higher than that of the average American citizen. In an attempt to either reconcile or reject the effects of idealizing attainment of masculinity through combat scenarios, I have conducted research through both first- and second-hand sources. I have sat in on and transcribed interviews conducted with combat veterans, as well as done research with scholarly articles and literature, both fiction and nonfiction.

It is important that the conclusion reached from this research is conclusive and unambiguous. It is clear to me that the idea of going to war in order to become a proper man is dangerous; it can lead to a misguided idea of war, and can also lead to a social belief (which is widely held in the United States), that soldiers should be mentally unbreakable, regardless of their physical injuries or health. Mental toughness is part of the image of the American soldier; he must follow orders, and he must be strong; in essence, he must be the quintessential man. This portrayal of soldiers as mentally unbreakable is dangerous, partly because soldiers are precisely the opposite; in the midst of combat, many reach their breaking points, and it is unreasonable to expect them to be mentally impenetrable. Soldiers must be treated as human beings experiencing trauma instead of being told to stifle their concerns and experiences in hopes of appearing more like an unattainable masculine ideal. The real question is, what are the effects of the unrealistic expectations we have for soldiers' mental toughness and capacity?

CHAPTER II

IDEALIZATION

The ideas of both masculinity and combat are deeply engrained in the other; Nancy Hartsock and Joshua Goldstein identify masculinity with war in opposing ways, but each definitively acknowledges the intertwining relationship that exists between them. Hartsock defines masculinity as “one of the key underlying causes of war,” while Goldstein asserts that the “social practice of war requires the production and reproduction of masculine men” (Pitchford 2). It is relatively easy to see how either could be true; the machismo of man often does lead to violent shows of dominance, which, on a grand scale could be manifested as war. However, the construct of war has an inherent need for men with masculine qualities, and it is clear that men must possess the mental and physical toughness required for combat in order for a war to be fought successfully.

Pitchford also points out that while war is often perceived as going back as far as human consciousness, it is in fact a recent construction in the scope of man’s history. In its incipient stages, this construction of war required men to see the faces of the men they were killing; lacking the technology to efficiently kill from long distances, these soldiers had practical reasons for watching their enemies die. They needed to be sure that they were eliminating opposing forces, which was only possible by killing with excessive force, violence, and a strong will to fight in the imminent face of death. These soldiers, therefore, were required to be forceful and maintain strength of mind in order to kill and remain effective in the field. These early soldiers are likely the root of modern war-time masculinity, which requires the same bravery and physical strength

of soldiers that it did hundreds of years ago, even if technological advances no longer require them to perform the same face-to-face killing roles.

According to Hartsock, “the warriors’s social role is defined by the fact that he must go to meet those who would kill him” (140). This view of the soldier’s social role would perhaps be unchallenged as recently World War One, in which short-range gunfire was still the most effective and widely-used weapon in the military. However, as changing technology takes over roles in combat that were previously commandeered by soldiers, men who would once get the chance to approach their enemies and either kill them or be killed no longer have the crucial opportunity to build individualized perceptions of their own masculinity. It goes without saying, then, that the measure of masculinity in the modern military is slightly different than it was before the use of contemporary technology was introduced in warfare. As previously mentioned, the modern soldier no longer always has the opportunity to face its enemy in combat. In fact, some soldiers never see the landscape of war; they are confined to offices or headquarters, operating drones which will act as their substitutes in killing. There is no longer a confrontation, but instead a machine operated by a man with a switchboard which has the capability to destroy more lives than perhaps the man himself could kill in personal combat. How does a soldier’s perception of self-masculinity change when he or she is removed from face-to-face warfare and demoted to a secondary role in combat? According to Pitchford, “Without the opportunity to go to face the enemy, they could not conceive of their participation in the war as equating to the heroic action of which they held such high expectations” (4). This statement seems to ask a question: what happens when war does not live up to a soldier’s expectations of it? How is a man’s perception of

his own masculinity affected by the inability to fight face-to-face? This is a question of imminent importance as war technology progresses and the need for soldiers in the field becomes lessened.

The ideal of heroism and sacrifice related to face-to-face combat is often correlated with male companionship in war, a construct which is essential to perceptions of military masculinity. To elaborate on this particular idealism, Sarah Cole notes in *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* that “Combat was not the only forum in which male intimacy was elevated and tested... but it became kind of a standard, as well as a metaphor, for the most resilient, cherished, and vulnerable of bonds” (6). Cole goes on to note that this standard for male friendship could be highly misleading; although war and camaraderie of the trenches was often idealized as the height of masculine friendship, Cole claims that comradeship was “meant to sustain the soldier, to provide the possibility for heroic action, to redeem the horrific suffering that was endlessly inflicted. Yet one of the basic facts of war was that it destroyed friendship” (139). Cole continues, claiming that “despite all its self-presentation as the site of male loyalty... war assaulted friendship in two ways. Individual friendships were killed in the ordinary course of the day, and the concept of friendship was treated with contempt by a bureaucracy that ceaselessly and arbitrarily separated friends from one another” (Cole 148). Interestingly enough, soldiers themselves often come back from war with one friend (or a group of friends) that exemplifies precisely the camaraderie that war is capable of tearing apart. It is this friendship that is often highlighted in movies and memoirs, possibly because it is the most impressing, sustaining, and redeeming part of any given soldier’s wartime experience.

The ideal of masculine friendship built through visions of blood, gunfire, and trenches as defined by Cole is just that; it is an unobtainable ideal, and an “impossible demand for intimacy”. In fact, the ideal of masculine friendship built through combat “seems blithely to sweep aside tensions that ordinarily inhere in such relations - tensions involving the body, the individual’s conflict with the group” (Cole 139). In other words, the same social construct of masculinity that requires rugged and individualized masculinity cannot also be a construct of interdependence; the two concepts are inherently at odds with one another. Which, then, is the ultimate masculine ideal? Is it the rugged individual, or the man who loses his life to save and further other men?

The use of “the buddy-system,” a system in which soldiers depend heavily on each other for safety, shelter, and protection, brings us slightly closer to the militarized ideal of manhood. Wesely asserts that “Men fight because they belong to a group that fights. They fight for their friends, their ‘buddies’. They fight because they have been trained to fight and because failure to do so endangers not just their own lives, but also those of the people immediately around them with whom they have formed powerful social bonds” (276). Mike, a veteran of the war in Afghanistan, describes more than anything else, missing “the camaraderie... I mean, everybody has their own motives for doing what they do. But in combat, your motives don’t matter really. You don’t fight for what you... As bad as it sounds, you don’t fight for what you believe in. You fight for the person next to you.” Men, especially in the military, are not trained to fight for the rugged individual; instead, there is a greater unit for which they put themselves on the line. Soldiers fight for one another, thereby sacrificing themselves as an ultimate display of the masculine.

Interestingly, the motivations for soldiers enlisting to go to war have not changed dramatically with political or structural changes in the military over the last two centuries. Instead, as Wessely concludes, war is not idealized by enlisting men because of their patriotism or political doctrine. Instead, the prevailing reason that war is fought lies on a more individualized than societal plane; soldiers admitted to fighting for the man next to them more often than they cited any other reason. “For example,” Wessely writes, “a study of ‘morale’ in the Israeli army, based on interviews with 4,723 participants in the Yom Kippur War, concluded that ‘belief in the country, historical reasons for war, rightness of the government, and so forth, all were irrelevant’” (277). Wessely also notes that following World War II, the same phenomenon was at play; “Out went previous doctrines that men fought for moral reasons (patriotism, esprit de corps, pride and leadership, and so on), and in came the core role of small-group psychology. Specific motivations — those located in time and place, such as patriotism, religion and ideology — were replaced by more general explanations” (275).

This also seemed to be the case with soldiers interviewed in the After Combat project conducted by Dr. Eide and Colonel Gibler; Mike, for example, admitted candidly that his reason for fighting was to protect and serve the men he was enlisted with, and not for political or doctrinal reasons. In fact, Mike admitted that the soldiers were dreadfully ill-informed of the war’s political implications, and were more concerned with performing their duty as soldiers than they were with questioning why they were required to perform at all. This does not necessarily explain reasons for enlistment (why fight for the man next to you when you’ve never met them be

fore?), but it does bring our focus back to Cole's idea of comradeship as being essential to military masculinity and idealism. Rather than be concerned about the political or economic consequences of war, it seems to be common for men to put on horse-blinders and see only the immediacy of protecting their friends and fellow soldiers.

When these troops return from their missions, they immediately face an assault on the masculinity they've worked so tirelessly to achieve. As already noted, mental toughness is crucial to idealized perceptions of masculinity. However, the recent assessment of psychological damage resulting from combat known as PTSD, breaks down the image of mental toughness that soldiers should exemplify. Before PTSD was recognized as a disorder following the Vietnam war, psychological damage in combat situations was chalked up to soldiers' inability to maintain an acceptable level of courage and mental strength, two characteristics that are heavily affiliated with idealized versions of masculinity. As Simon Wessely writes, "At the end of the war the ascendant view was that the war-traumatized veteran was weak and selfish.. The [British] Shell-Shock Commission generally continued to reflect traditional Edwardian values of courage and moral fibre" (271). So although psychologists were aware of adverse mental and social effects of long-term exposure to trauma, political and military entities worldwide were still resistant to the idea that mental breakdown was anything other than a marker of a soldier who was ill-dispositioned for combat to begin with.

In order to account for the theory that some soldiers were not fit for combat before entering the theatre of war, the American military began psychological screenings for soldiers prior to their enlistment for combat. The results of this separation were quite telling; according to Wessely,

“Selecting the ‘right stuff’ at induction did not prevent psychiatric casualties, but did create a serious manpower shortage. So in a vast natural experiment, many of those previously rejected for military service by the American psychiatrists were re-inducted into service, and the majority made satisfactory soldiers” (7).

Instead of documenting fewer cases of mental breakdown, the American military was forced to admit that pre-existing psychosocial conditions were, in fact, not the cause of mental injuries sustained during war. This led to a conclusion that is, on some level, much more worrisome. The problem is not what a soldier is like before the war; the problem is that once a combat soldier is exposed to the levels of trauma that war can impose, each man has and frequently encounters their own breaking point. This means that the standards imposed earlier in military history regarding masculinity and mental toughness should have been wiped from the slate; although it is now common knowledge that even the strongest, most ideally masculine man can and very likely will suffer from mental and social breakdowns following long-term (or even intense short-term) exposure to trauma, military idealism still requires the perfect soldier to maintain stability and mental toughness.

The ability to survive exposure to trauma not only a medical issue when a soldier returns from war, but is in itself yet another ideal of masculinity. A soldier’s ability to strive through trauma is glorified by the Armed Forces through its recruitment process and advertisements; this is for ob

vious reasons. Military objectives are based on a soldier's ability to obtain and display characteristics consistent with the masculine. Whether it is masculinity that makes war necessary or war that makes masculinity necessary, there is no denying; what the military needs are young men who hold specific ideals about what enlisting in the military will do for them personally. Regardless of specific reasons for joining the military, it is relatively easy to see that each reason can be traced back to a desire to do whatever it takes (including surviving and overcoming trauma) to earn a perception of themselves as a masculine ideal.

Whether enlisting is a way to follow in a father's footsteps, grow up, or provide for a family, the reason is all the same; the man enlisting wants to become a better man, or a stronger man, or to evolve into a man from a boy. Following in a father's footsteps is a way to be seen as what the father once was; a man, a soldier, and a provider. The desire to grow up is traced back to masculinity in a rather obvious way, in that the person in question believes that military service will, by its end, have turned the boy into the man life requires him to be. Men who enlist in the military as a means to provide for their family are subscribing to and performing societal perceptions of masculinity as being a successful bread-winner for those who depend on him. Regardless of the reason for the enlistment of young men, in particular, there is always a way in which to find even the subtlest traces of idealism.

Perhaps this is the reason young men enlist in the military; they are shown, from a remarkably young age, a highly idealized version of war and militarism. They are not well-informed about the growing psychological understanding of combat, and are often relying on enlistment to save

them from a life on the streets, or a home life that is not conducive to rising in society. In this respect, movies and documentaries that glorify war are motivating factors for enlistment; they are a promise for camaraderie that may or may not actually take shape, and they are a promise for a life in which a soldier belongs to something larger and more important than themselves. These representations of militarism, realistic or not, have an effect that is not to be underestimated. The marketing of GI Joes, war movies, and toy soldiers do not glorify patriotism; instead, they glorify the soldier with a gun, a masculine construct that is not informative of reality, but instead contributes to idealism and misconceptions of military life.

The military is a highly idealistic and idealized institution, relying on images of constructed positivity in order to recruit soldiers, build relationships, and maintain a perception of infallible camaraderie that, although created on occasion, is not a concrete and guaranteed product of joint participation in combat. These constructs of masculinity are (and have always been), deeply ingrained in military activity. However, as the production of war becomes more thoroughly integrated with technology and our understanding of war on a psychological level becomes more apt, the level of perceived masculinity required to perform combat activities is likely to decrease, perhaps creating a new image of militarism that does not exclude those who are disinclined to the idealism and masculinity of modern combat. However, the fundamental ideals of militarism are unlikely to change completely; there are always the war movies to remind us of what combat and war *should* look like.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Although no measurements can be taken regarding levels of masculinity from interviews and textual representations of combat, it is clear that masculinity plays a large role in militarism, whether idealized or self-affirmed. A man's perception of masculinity has the potential to affect his roles in combat, as well as to affect his state of mind upon return from deployment. Although masculinity in militarism has been found to be an ideal that is nearly unattainable, it is clear that men still strive for it and will continue to do so with the evolving of modern warfare.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

Representations of war and manhood through narrative conventions rely on socially constructed perceptions of masculinity to create the image of the idealized soldier. In these representations, a man's measure of masculinity comes from what many would call a traditional masculinity model. In this model, as previously discussed, the ideal soldier is strong, aggressive, and even inherently violent. While he is not one to take orders lightly, he will take commands he feels are necessary for domination and conquest. These representations of the ideal soldier, often portrayed in Hollywood as men like Rambo (unforgiving, rash, and highly effective killers) are not the reality when narrative is examined more closely, both in the case of fictional writings and live experience. In the discourse of militarism, men look not to their combat effectiveness to assign manhood, but to their ability to feel competence and administer care. In Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, which is often looked to as the staple literary representation of war, a youth feels angst in the face of what he perceives to be his own incompetence in his inability to participate in the war for being stationed in the wrong location. In this particular narrative representation, the youth sees his role as a soldier as to be competent in relation to his fellows; the soldiers around him have attained a level of involvement and validity that he, being unscathed, has not. Once the youth has resigned his pining for sameness and realizes just how shaken and wounded his comrades actually are, he moves on from a desire for competence to a desire to ad

minister care which he cannot give. When faced with the reality that he is helpless to administer assistance to his wounded comrades, Henry “reached an anguish where his friend’s sobs scorched him. He strove to express his loyalty, but he could only make fantastic gestures” (Crane 41). His inability to administer care renders him useless and, for the moment, leads the reader to perceive a loss of masculinity in his helpless, “fantastic gestures”.

While this singular representation of a soldier’s desire for competence is represented through fictional characters, there are several nonfiction accounts which follow the same model. In an interview conducted for the After Combat project, a soldier named Mike recounted that his greatest and most fulfilling experiences in the war were ones in which he was either cared for by his loader, or in which he was able to care for his loader in return. He prefaces his experiences in combat by referring to this relationship with his loader, making it clear that this is the lens through which he views his experience in combat:

“The reason this was, is that after the incident we spoke about earlier.. I was put on suicide watch because they were all afraid I was gonna go crazy. It was a distinct possibility. Well, my loader never left my side throughout all of that. I started having nightmares and what he would do, is he would sit in my room. And whenever I woke up from a nightmare, he’d make me do stuff with my machine gun. Because the busy stuff with the hands distracted the mind. Me and him grew really close during that.. I think it was a week before I was back to normal. Well.. my loader had his first child while we were deployed. They didn’t let him go back home to see his wife. It made all of us very angry, because we wanted him to go home. So what we did was, we locked him in his room, gave him a laptop, and set him up on Skype with his wife. And we posted two guards in the door. Which, I was there, and I was standing outside that door. We would get him food, water, whatever he needed. If we were attacked, the two guards were to escort him and the laptop to a bunker so he could stay on Skype with his wife”.

This also reinforces what has been heretofore mentioned of the buddy system; a large component of a soldier’s masculinity has been portrayed through narrative as caring for his companions and

fighting not for himself, but for those around him. This system of ethics and military procedure, no doubt, fall categorically under “care”. Mike places responsibility for his life in the hands of his loader both when his physical wounds need care and when his psychological ones do.

Through representations of soldiers who view their worth and masculinity in relation to their competence and ability to administer care, it becomes clear that conventional motivations for war and war masculinities are not, in fact, about dominance, violence, or effectiveness in combat as a killing or disabling entity. The war experience remembered and registered by soldiers is, more often than not, an evaluation of themselves as a person; was the soldier able to fulfill his duties, and did he feel competent in relation to his peers? Was he able to maintain relationships that made him feel accepted, wanted, and part of a greater entity than just a singular soldier? Was he able to care for those he was accountable and held himself responsible for? In my analysis of several sources both literary and documentary, if the answer to any of these questions (especially more than one) is no, then it is very likely that the soldier in question experiences doubts and feelings of incompetence that lead to some form of emasculation, whether it manifests itself outwardly or not.

Both effeminization and infantilization are outward representations of this emasculation. These processes can occur, as stated previously, when a soldier feels or is made to feel that he is incompetent in his role as a soldier and comrade. It is in trying to avoid effeminization and infantilization, soldiers can wittingly or unwittingly add to and subtract from their masculinity through transactional interactions with those around them, almost as if their masculinity were a form of

currency. This is possible because gender identity and assignment of masculine or effeminate qualities are inherently fluid and relational; gender identity and representation are not permanent, concrete parts of personality that are inflexible over the course of a lifetime. Using this fluidity to add to their self-worth and masculinity, soldiers are often able to derive masculinity from situations in which someone around them is perhaps either showing an instance of effeminization or infantilization simply by acting more like a man.

My conclusion, then, is that gender roles within the military are changing. Masculinity is no longer a function of dominance and rugged individualism, but a result of care, competence, and the ability to measure one's worth as a person. It is my finding that men are striving to more traditionally feminine ideals even within combat roles, choosing to measure their worth in terms of their ability to function as a figure who strongly resembles that of a responsible caretaker.

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